

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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It is decidedly irksome to know that you are going to be murdered, and not know the reason why. It is almost as bad as knowing a certain name, having it right on the tip of your tongue, and not being able to recall it.



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DURING the course of the last twenty years I have been hired to kill quite a number of people and I have managed my missions with dispatch, neatness, and no subsequent embarrassment to my clients.

My victims have been varied in station and occupation, but they had at least one thing in common—an enemy who was willing to spend money for their demise.

This, however, was the first time someone had ever attempted to hire me to kill myself.

It wasn't that Walter Brandt *knew* he was engaging me to dispose of myself. He just knew that he was employing *someone* to do the job.

Obviously my relations with my clients must be circuitous. I cannot let anyone know just who I am and so I have a box number under an assumed name and communicate with my customers through that medium. And as an added precaution, I pick up my mail at odd

hours, most often from midnight to morning.

I had no idea how Walter discovered the existence of my box, but I imagined that one of my former clients might have recommended me.

All this, of course, left me a little shaken and obviously reluctant.

I really didn't know Walter Brandt at all. He was, as a matter of fact, just someone I merely nod to at the club and I couldn't—for the life of me—imagine what possible reason he could have for wanting to bring about my death. Like most of my clients, he refused to divulge his motive. He simply wanted me out of this world.

And what was particularly crushing to my ego was that Brandt was haggling about the price. We had exchanged three letters and so far we could come to no agreement. I would have declined the whole assignment, except, un-

WHEN BUYING A

A NOVELETTE BY JACK RITCHIE

der the circumstances, I did not want Brandt to go to someone else with his commission.

I had to know more about Brandt and so one evening I managed the coincidence which put us in adjacent chairs before the club fireplace.

Brandt was a thin man, in his early forties, and the line of his profile was more or less diminishing.

"Bit cold outside," I ventured.

"Rather unusual for this time of year."

He drew his eyes away from his newspaper for a moment. "I hadn't noticed."

I listened to the fireplace logs crackle for half a minute. "I understand that you were once stalked by the giant sloth of South America."

He glanced up again. "That was Williams. However most authorities consider the giant sloths to



FINE MURDER

WHEN BUYING A FINE MURDER

have been extinct long, long ago."

I nodded. "I've always been a bit dubious about Williams and his stories."

"Wouldn't mention it to Williams though," Brandt said. "He loses his temper easily. Killed a man once in Guatemala."

I doubted that too, but I took the opening. "Horrible thing to kill a man."

Brandt considered that. "Depends on the circumstances, I suppose."

"But surely if a man needs killing we must leave that job to society itself. We have courts, and juries, and . . ." I hesitated a moment. "And authorized executioners."

Brandt smiled faintly. "I often wonder if we have judges, juries, and executioners, merely because we are cowards. We are afraid to do what must be done ourselves. We want to subdivide our feelings of guilt when we punish anyone."

Perhaps it was my imagination, but when he used the word "subdivide" something seemed to flicker in his eyes.

I probed further. "I simply can't understand any reason sufficiently important, for one man to kill another."

Brandt raised an eyebrow. "For revenge. For a woman. For money. My dear man, there are hundreds of reasons."

Yes, I agreed silently, there are hundreds of reasons. But what is

yours? We are practically strangers, and yet you want to kill me.

When I looked Brandt's way again, he was on the crossword puzzle and that clearly ended our conversation.

As I prepared to leave the club ten minutes later, Madsen helped me with my coat in the hall.

"This Walter Brandt," I said. "Nice chap."

"Yes, sir," Madsen said noncommittally.

"He's in railroads?"

Madsen straightened my collar. "No, sir. He's Brandt Enterprises. Apartment buildings."

It was nine-thirty when I got into the taxi for the ride home to my apartment and to my wife.

When one speaks of Helen, one inevitably feels compelled to add, "What a gorgeous creature," for she is near perfection in human form.

Have you ever noticed that a plain woman will develop her personality, or perhaps in extreme cases, her intelligence?

A beautiful woman feels no such compulsion. She just *is* and that is sufficient for her.

Helen can refrain from reading even the daily newspapers for weeks at a time without the slightest evidence of pain. The day she graduated from high school, she closed her books and her eyes have remained innocent of any attempt to strain the mind.

She does, though, have an instinctive protective sense. She real-

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izes that in matters of the intellect her best response is attentiveness, a smile, and liberal silence.

Mind you, I am not complaining. I have a deep distrust for women who exhibit intelligence. They remind me rather of forced plants. The entire idea is contrary to the laws of nature.

I consider Helen perfect the way she is. I also collect Van Goghs, black jade statuary, and Gobelin tapestries. I do not expect any of them to be scintillating conversationalists either.

I found Helen quite by accident a year ago while she was working as the cashier in a small restaurant and I immediately recognized that I had found a jewel destined for a setting.

Helen proved amenable—to a degree. I would have preferred a less binding arrangement, but the morals of Sheboygan were still fresh with her, and I found myself, at the age of forty-five, joining the ranks of the benedicts.

When I entered the apartment I found Helen before her dressing table.

"You're home early," she said, not taking her eyes from the mirror.

"I felt rather tired." I watched her gently massaging her face. "How much of the day does that take?"

She glanced up at my reflection. "About ten or fifteen minutes, I'd say."

"I mean the whole thing. All the grooming."

"Including the clothes?"

I sighed. "Yes. Including the clothes."

She appeared as thoughtful as she could. "I really don't know, Ronnie. But it keeps me busy all day. I hardly know where the time goes."

"Don't you ever get bored?"

She looked back over her shoulder. "Why no, Ronnie. There's always something to do. Like nails, or hair." Her eyes went back to the mirror. "Do you ever get bored, Ronnie?"

I was a bit startled. "Me? Of course not. No man of intellect does."

"I mean you just walk around and touch those wall carpets, or play with those little plastic statues or stare at those gloomy paintings. Doesn't that bore you?"

"Van Gogh was one of the world's greatest painters," I explained tolerantly.

"Really? How do you know?"

"The critics are in complete agreement."

"I mean do you *really* like him or do you think you ought to. To keep in style, I mean."

I was faintly irritated. "I am a man of impeccable taste."

"I know, Ronnie. Of course you are." She seemed to examine me for a moment or two. "I never pried, Ronnie. I know you have an inheritance or something, because

you never work. But I think you ought to do something. Something important, I mean. So you don't get bored."

"I am *not* bored."

"You ought to be able to feel as though you're important to the world."

It was difficult to keep my temper. "I *am* important to the world. You have no idea how important."

"Of course you're important to me," she said soothingly. "But I mean you should take up something important to your fellow-man."

"Like what?" I demanded.

"Oh, I don't know, Ronnie. But something significant. Like life and death."

My temper dissipated and I smiled. "Perhaps some day, my dear."

She wiped her fingertips on tissue. "Ronnie, are you satisfied with me?"

I patted her shoulder. "I like you just the way you are. I wouldn't want anything changed."

She smiled. "That's what I thought."

I went into the living room, made myself a drink, and sat down to enjoy it.

I congratulated myself as I looked about the room. I was most fortunate in finding this apartment and during the course of ten years it had become my storehouse, the repository for my treasures.

The superintendent of the build-

ing had been hectoring me lately to give up my lease. He wanted to cut up the rooms to create three smaller apartments out of one. But I stood firmly on my rights. My lease was ironclad and extendible.

Our discussions became so heated, in fact, that one time I descended to the vernacular, "Over my dead body!"

Now I sipped my drink and this moment would have been perfect except that the problem of Walter Brandt again intruded itself into my mind.

Why in the world would he want to kill me? For money? He very likely had fifty times as much as I had. For revenge? Revenge of what? I'd never harmed him in any possible way I could imagine.

For a woman?

I was about to shake my head to that too when a staggering speculation came to me.

But it was preposterous! Ridiculous!

And yet . . . ?

I was absolutely certain of Helen. Besides she hadn't the imagination for anything like . . . I treat her well, I thought peevishly. She wants for nothing.

It was too tenuous, too impossible to consider.

I found myself breathing rather hard.

Helen and Brandt? My mind seemed to squeak. Amour? With Walter Brandt?

But he was so . . . so insignifi-

cant. Really not cultured at all. Hardly presentable physically.

Yet women are notoriously unpredictable in their choices of . . . companions.

The next morning I left the apartment early.

The agency I selected was a large one. I believe in patronizing the best, certainly the most successful, when one must resort to employing private detectives.

There was a quiet, soft-lighted waiting room and a receptionist whose voice was modulated and whose appearance showed tasteful grooming.

Mr. Lister, who apparently was in charge, had a gray military mustache and a Princeton class ring.

I was brief and to the point. "I would like to have my wife under surveillance."

Lister was business-like. "Do you suspect anything?"

"I merely want my wife watched. I believe that should be sufficient for your purposes."

"Of course," Lister said equably. "Do you desire any particular portion of the day?"

"Twenty-four hours."

He nodded. "I merely asked because some of our clients like to save money. They usually prefer to take over one eight hour shift for themselves."

He studied my clothes and appeared satisfied. "I will have the men on eight hour shifts. However, since they do not work seven

days a week, it will be necessary to hire an additional three men on week ends."

"As many men as you need," I said.

"Would you like the reports weekly?"

"Daily. I'll pick them up myself."

When I left him, he was happily computing figures on his desk pad.

I spent several hours at an art gallery, a boorish regional exhibition, and then, finding myself in the neighborhood of the restaurant where I'd discovered Helen, I followed a whim and entered.

The waitress who came to my table smiled brightly. "Why, Mr. Reynolds. Imagine seeing you here again."

"I'm sorry, but . . ."

"Oh, I don't expect you to remember me. I never waited on you here and we were introduced only once. That was at Helen's wedding."

"But, of course," I said. However as far as I was concerned, her bird-like features were completely unfamiliar.

"I'm Elsie Schwendt," she said and then giggled. "I mean Elsie Barrows. It's so hard to get used to, to my new name."

"I imagine so. I would like a rare sirloin."

She pointed to a tense-faced man who was evidently lecturing a bus boy. "That's Mr. Barrows. We were married just two months ago. He's the assistant manager and he wants

me to work as long as I can, but—"

"Yes," I said. "And sliced tomatoes."

"Some day I intend to look Helen up and see how she's doing."

"By all means. Just the steak and tomatoes. No side dishes or bread."

"Helen and I came east at the same time," she said, "and got jobs here. I was one of her girl friends in high school." She felt impelled to qualify that. "Not one of her really close friends though. She was more the intellectual type and read a lot."

I chuckled. "Helen? Intellectual?"

Elsie Barrows nodded. "She was valedictorian of her graduating class."

I laughed shortly. "How many were there in the class? Three? Four?"

"Why, no," Elsie said. "There were 326 students who graduated. And Helen had the highest average in the history of the school."

I took a sip of water and smiled. "My dear Mrs. Barrows, are we talking about the same person? My wife is Helen Thorne Reynolds."

"Of course," Elsie said. "Thorne was her maiden name."

I rubbed my chin and scowled.

"I suppose she attends classes during the day," Elsie said.

"Classes? What classes?"

"College, of course."

I was getting warm and irritated. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Elsie seemed surprised. "Isn't Helen going to college?"

My patience was frayed almost beyond endurance. "My dear Mrs. Barrows, Helen is not going to college."

Elsie digested the information. "That's strange. Helen always said she wanted a college education more than anything else. That and money, of course. All of us girls were very sensible about wanting money."

She gazed fondly in the direction of her husband. "I passed up a lot of opportunities until I found Henry. He's only twenty-six and already assistant manager here. This restaurant is one of a chain, you know." Her face was proud. "Henry will go far. He's an Organization Man."

I realized I was making water rings on the table cloth and stopped. "There's a Cheboygan in Michigan. Perhaps you're getting it confused with . . ."

"Sheboygan. In Wisconsin," Elsie said. "Helen's folks couldn't afford to send her to college and so she came to New York to earn money. She was going to work a year, then go to college a year, and then work another year and so on until she got all the way up to her doctor's degree. Mathematics, I think."

Elsie regarded me with the coyness of a possible secret. "Are you sure Helen isn't going to college?"

"I wouldn't allow her to," I snapped.

"I mean maybe when you're working and away from home."

"I do not work," I said stiffly. "I am home most of the time and I have never noticed Helen either going to or returning from college."

"That's funny," Elsie said. "Helen always said she wanted to go to college more than anything else in the world. And Helen always got what she wanted." She reflected a moment. "You know, Helen once told me that she'd kill anybody who tried to stop her from getting one. I think she meant it too."

That was the last straw. "Oh, come now! People just don't go about killing people in order to go to college."

"I guess not," Elsie admitted. "But still sometimes when Helen wanted something and she couldn't get it . . ." Elsie shivered a little. "Helen has very funny eyes. Have you noticed? Sort of green and sometimes they seem to glow. But then the whole family was a little . . ." She stopped and blushed. "Be sure to give my regards to Helen. Sirloin rare and tomatoes?"

The steak was overdone, as seems to be the usual case, and the cut was more Utility than Prime.

As I was paying for my dinner, a piece of paper fell out of my wallet. I picked it up and glanced at it idly. It was a receipt for my last month's rent and I noticed something that had escaped my attention before.

The printed heading on the receipt indicated that I'd been paying my rent to Brandt Enterprises. It was something that I'd never realized before, since all my dealings were with the superintendent.

An amusing thought occurred to me. Suppose Brandt were actually trying to get rid of me because I refused to allow my apartment to be subdivided.

It was something to titillate the mind.

The cashier was looking at me rather peculiarly and I realized that I'd been chuckling. "Just remembering a joke I heard earlier today," I explained hastily.

In the hall of my apartment, I took off my hat and coat and stood in front of the mirror to adjust my personal appearance.

I saw that the mirror reflected a portion of the living room mirror and that in turn revealed a corner of the room. Idly I experimented a bit by moving from side to side until the entire living room came into view.

Helen was in an easy chair.

And she was reading a book!

More than that, she had a pencil in her hand and a pad of paper on her knee. Every few moments she would frown and scribble something on the pad.

I steadied myself against a small table, and that toppled a vase of flowers.

Helen's movements were feline swift and I watched, fascinated. In

a moment the book, the pad, and the pencil disappeared beneath the cushions of her chair and Helen became something languid, serene, placidly unoccupied.

"Is that you, dear?" she called.

I pulled myself together. "Yes, Helen."

Later that evening, when she was out of the room, I investigated beneath the cushions. I recognized only one of the equations on the pad of paper. It was one of the few things I remembered from my required Mathematical Analysis course in college.

The next three weeks were entirely unsatisfactory. Brandt continued to haggle about the price of my death and, despite my prodgings, persistently refused to divulge his motive.

And Helen went well into integral calculus.

In Mr. Lister's office, I finished reading his twenty-first daily report and put it aside. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Nothing at all suspicious," Lister agreed. "She's seen no one whom we might construe as a . . . rival."

"Not even college," I muttered. "Either she's taking correspondence lessons or she's doing this on her own."

Lister raised an eyebrow. "College?"

"Nothing." I sighed. "I think it would be useless to watch her any further."

Lister agreed, but reluctantly. "Usually if they have been seeing someone, they just can't bear to keep apart for more than a week. You have a completely faithful wife, Mr. Reynolds."

He studied me a moment and then cleared his throat. "However, if you desired, I'm sure we could arrange something that would hold up in any court."

I scowled at him.

Lister shrugged. "Just a thought."

That evening I was hardly aware of the Beethoven concerto on my record player as I sat and brooded. Brandt's motive remained a mystery. Except for the wretched possibility that he wanted my apartment so badly that . . .

No. Such a thought was hardly worthy of consideration.

And Helen.

Naturally I was relieved that she was completely faithful, but those secret studies would have to stop. I would have to speak to her soon.

"Would you like a drink, dear?" Helen asked.

I came out of my reverie. "Thank you, my dear." I got to my feet. "I'll be back in a moment. I'd like to change to my smoking jacket."

I selected the maroon silk from the bedroom closet and prepared to rejoin Helen. In the hall I automatically stopped to look in the mirror. I had been doing that for the last three weeks, often profitably.

I saw Helen put two drinks on the cocktail table. I was about to turn away and enter the living room, when something stopped me.

Helen had a small white envelope in her hand and she tore off a corner.

I watched with increasing fascination as she carefully tapped the contents into the glass that was intended for me. When the envelope was evidently empty, she crumpled it into a tiny ball and dropped it into an ashtray.

Then she resumed her chair and smiled. It was a slow, waiting smile.

I wiped my moist fingers and strolled into the living room.

Helen's face was smoothed of expression, but her eyes appeared rather more attentive than her features indicated. "The drinks are ready, dear."

"Thank you. Your martinis are always perfect." While I lit a cigarette I let my eyes stray to the glass. The powder was undetectable. "Had a busy day, dear?"

"About like usual, Ronnie."

I still felt shaken. It was insane. Irrational. One simply does not kill one's husband just because one wants to go to college.

I licked my lips. "My dear, I'm beginning to think that perhaps I've been a bit selfish."

She showed faint surprise. "Selfish?"

"Yes, my dear. Here I have kept you secluded as something of a jewel, a thing of beauty."

Only the corners of her mouth indicated a smile. "You've treated me well, Ronnie."

"Yes," I agreed. "But I have never considered that you might be more than a woman, an ornament; that you might have a mind too and that you'd like to give it some license." I corrected that. "Some expression."

I plunged into the cold water. "Have you ever thought about going to college?"

Her eyes flickered. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"It was just something that came to my mind." I was perspiring slightly. "Why don't you enroll? Tomorrow. Or whenever the semester starts?"

Her smile was languid. "Why, thank you, Ronnie."

"Then you will?"

"I'll think it over." Then her voice became a shade commanding. "Try your drink, Ronnie."

I was aghast. Here I had just given her blanket permission to go to college and yet she still wanted to kill me!

And then, in a flash, reason returned to me.

Of course! I had been thinking like a panicky fool. How ridiculous one's thoughts become in a moment of stress.

Helen wanted to kill me for the simplest and most classic of reasons. She wanted to get rid of me so she could have my money.

I felt somewhat giddy with elation.

tion. The world was logical again. Sane. Rational.

I almost drank to that before I remembered the contents of my glass.

And it was all so amusing. I lived well, but I lived on my income. I had no capital and, at the moment, I was worth less than three thousand dollars.

I suppose it wouldn't have been at all difficult to distract her attention for a moment and switch drinks. But I put the thought aside. It would put me in an embarrassing position. I had no plans for the disposal of her body and improvising in such a situation is a tricky business.

Helen leaned forward and picked up her drink. Her action was plainly intended to prompt me and I complied.

I sniffed the frosted glass and was faintly disappointed not to detect the odor of almonds. "Helen," I said. "Have you been happy with me?"

"Of course, dear." She sipped her drink and waited for me to emulate her.

I put the glass to my lips for a moment and then lowered it without tasting the martini. "And I with you, my dear."

Perhaps contented would have been a more accurate word. After our marriage I enjoyed the same feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction I'd experienced when I acquired one of the Arles landscapes.

Helen's eyes were on my glass. I laughed slightly. "You know, Helen, I was forty-five when I married you and I'd been a bachelor for a long time."

She seemed to take a deeper breath than usual. "Yes, dear. For forty-five years. Your drink is getting warm."

"And naturally, being single for so long, one tends to become set in one's ways—to form certain reservations on all matters—to become . . . ah, suspicious."

Her eyes narrowed. "Suspicious?"

I made my smile as disarming as I could. "After all, there you were, a beautiful young woman who certainly could have done better. And there was I, a man of forty-five." I cleared my throat. "With money."

There was a definite greenish glow in Helen's eyes.

I raised the glass to my lips, hesitated a moment, and then put it down again, untasted.

I am positive the mind of Helen Thorne Reynolds swore.

"And so," I said. "I never did get around to changing my will."

Helen's head cocked slowly. "Will?"

I nodded. "You see I leave everything to my brother."

Actually I have no brother. No will either, for that matter.

"But now that some time has passed and we've become so adjusted, so happy, I intend to change it." I smiled benignly. "I am going

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to make you my sole beneficiary the next time I see my lawyer."

I picked up the drink and raised it to my lips. "Well, cheers."

It was surprising how fast Helen moved. One moment in an easy chair six feet away and the next standing beside me with her fingers firmly about my glass.

"Your drink is much too warm. I'll pour you another."

We played finger-tip tug-of-war. "No, my dear. I really prefer martinis this way. I get the full flavor."

"Nonsense," she said positively. "The reason martinis are chilled is to kill the taste. Otherwise they remind you of gasoline."

What Helen did next was not original. However, under the circumstances, action was more imperative than originality and the glass shot from my hand and tumbled to the rug.

"Oh, dear," Helen said routinely. "How clumsy of me. I do hope I haven't ruined the rug."

"Never mind the rug, dear," I said soothingly. "I'm sure the spot can be removed."

Helen brought me another martini. It was chilled and delicious. As I drank, I reflected sadly that now I would have to get rid of Helen before she got rid of me.

It was slightly after five the next afternoon and Helen was still at her hairdresser's, when the buzzer of my apartment sounded.

When I opened the door, Walter Brandt stood in front of me.

The static of alarm alerted my body. Perhaps Brandt, quibbling soul that he was, had decided to save money and dispose of me himself.

"Mr. Reynolds," he said diffidently. "May I speak with you for a few moments?"

I believe I would have closed the door in his face except that Millie, our cook, took that moment to leave our apartment for the day.

"I'm going home now, Mr. Reynolds," she said.

It swiftly occurred to me that Brandt would not be foolish enough to murder me after he had been identified to a potential witness. A murderer just doesn't do that. At least I never have.

"Millie," I said. "This is Mr. Walter Brandt. He is Brandt Enterprises. The owner of this building."

They were mutually surprised by the introduction.

Millie opened her mouth to supply her last name, something which I had purposely omitted.

"Now run along, Millie, and be sure to tell all your friends that you met Walter Brandt at . . ." I glanced at my watch. "Precisely 5:17."

I watched her go and then rubbed my hands. "Won't you come in, Mr. Brandt?"

Five minutes later we were seated in my study and Brandt smiled in the manner of a man about to shock someone.

"Mr. Reynolds," he said. "For the

last five weeks I have been negotiating with a man to kill you."

The gall of the man! To come right out and admit it! He held up a hand. "Rest easy, Mr. Reynolds. The negotiations haven't been completed yet."

"Good," I said emphatically.

His smile widened. "I think I'd better start at the beginning. Do you remember Clement Hudson?"

I did. He had been one of my clients. But I was cautious. "No."

Brandt supplied information. "Two years ago Hudson's wife was murdered. At first the police suspected Hudson. It seems that everyone knew that he and she had been quarreling bitterly. She had the money in the family and gave him nothing more than a pitiful allowance."

I caught myself nodding and stopped.

"But Hudson had an unbreakable alibi. He was in the presence of at least fifteen people and over two hundred miles away when the murder was committed."

Of course, I thought complacently. It was planned that way.

"The whole affair struck Hudson extremely hard," Brandt said. "He became utterly despondent."

Remorseful, I corrected mentally.

"I was in his apartment when it happened," Brandt said.

I sat up. "His wife's murder?"

"No. When Hudson killed himself."

"Oh," I said with some relief.

"I was his best friend. I had been trying to console him over the loss of his wife, but apparently there was nothing I could do." Brandt shook his head sadly. "It happened so suddenly. Hudson left the room. I thought he was just getting his coat to go for a walk, but then I heard the shot. I rushed into his bedroom and there he was, on the floor. It was ghastly."

"That's the way it goes," I said. "He was dead?"

Brandt smiled significantly. "No. Not quite."

I stirred uneasily.

"He died within a matter of seconds, but before he did, he whispered something to me." Brandt's voice became a dramatic whisper. "He said, 'I killed her.'"

"But obviously that was impossible."

"That's not all he said. He also whispered a number. '1217.'"

I felt cold. That was my box number at the post office. "Are you positive?"

"Absolutely. I have very good hearing."

"Anything else?" I asked warily.

"Nothing. Just that. 'I killed her. 1217.'"

I decided to make myself a drink. "You told the police?"

Brandt shook his head. "No. As I told you, Hudson was my best friend. At the time I felt positive that he couldn't have killed his wife. I felt that his last words were a delirium, possibly expressing sim-

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ply a feeling of guilt that he hadn't been there to protect his wife. Under those circumstances, I saw no reason to tell the police. It would simply have jeopardized the good name of my friend.

One of his phrases seemed to stick out and I repeated it. "At the time?"

Brandt nodded. "At the time I thought Hudson couldn't have killed his wife, but then about a year ago the thought came to me that perhaps Hudson really had been responsible for her death. He could have *hired* someone to kill her."

What a keen, swift mind, I thought wryly. It took you only a year to think of that. "And *then* you went to the police?"

Brandt flushed slightly. "No. It had been over a year since Hudson killed himself, and I was afraid that the police might interpret my silence as obstructing justice."

"A distinct possibility," I murmured.

"And the number 1217 kept nagging at my mind until one day while I was collecting my mail, it suddenly struck me. 1217 could be the number of a postal box."

I put very little soda in my glass and took a swallow. Then I remembered my manners and began making a drink for Brandt.

"Then I thought further," Brandt said. "If Hudson had actually employed a killer, couldn't the negotiations have been conducted

by mail through box number 1217?"

"And *then*, of course, you went to the police?"

Brandt flushed again. "No. By this time eighteen months had passed. I would have been in more trouble than before."

And these are the very people who complain about police inaction in murder cases, I reflected sadly.

Brandt took a breath. "But I couldn't just leave everything there and forget about it. So I decided to try an experiment. I addressed a letter to the box myself—to negotiate for a murder."

I handed him his drink and said nothing.

"I was right," Brandt said with considerable elation. "It was the box number of a man who could be hired to kill."

I pursed my lips. "And why, pray, did you select me as your victim?"

Brandt smiled. "I really haven't an enemy in the world. And so while I was pondering on who to select as my victim, I was stumped until your name suddenly came to mind."

"I don't even know you," I said testily. "I've never harmed you in my life."

Brandt chuckled. "Not in a major way. But you've been giving Brandt Enterprises a little trouble. I'm converting this building into smaller apartments and so far ev-

everyone has willingly come to an agreement to vacate—except you.”

“Just because a man won’t give up his apartment is no sane reason to resort to murder,” I said indignantly. “That’s the most cold-blooded, inhuman thing I’ve ever heard of.”

“Tut, tut,” Brandt said soothingly. “Of course I had no intention of actually going through with it.”

“Well! I should hope not!”

“I merely wanted to engage in correspondence with him. I intended to watch the box and see who picked up the mail.” Brandt shook his head. “Unfortunately my plan isn’t working.”

I barely concealed my pleasure and relief. “Really?”

“I can’t watch the box twenty-four hours a day. It is physically impossible and besides I have a great deal of other work to do. The best I could manage was my lunch period and a few hours in the evening. But he never collected his mail while I was there.” Brandt sighed. “I prolonged the correspondence by pretending to haggle about the price, but. . . .” He shrugged.

I felt generous at his failure.

“The police could have the box watched twenty-four hours a day.”

“No,” Brandt said wearily. “I told you that it would be too embarrassing to explain everything to them now. And besides, suppose something goes wrong? If the killer got suspicious and abandoned

the box, I would find myself in a great deal of additional trouble with the authorities.”

My drink was delicious. “And so you have failed?”

He nodded grudgingly. “So far.” Then his expression warned me that he was about to enjoy startling me again. “I have decided to bring matters to a head. I will agree to his price and tell him to go ahead and kill you.”

“My dear man . . .” I began patiently.

“Naturally I won’t actually allow him to go through with it.”

“I should hope not.”

“He wants fifteen thousand and I will pay it,” Brandt said. “Though I think that’s a rather high figure.”

“It all depends on one’s point of view.”

“I will insist on certain specifications. I will direct the time you are to be murdered and the place.” He looked about. “Right here in your study seems ideal.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “It is comfortable.”

Brandt obviously had already made the plans. “You will arrange to be alone on the chosen night. You will be here in your study. At eight-thirty the murderer will let himself into your apartment and creep up behind you.”

“You will provide him with a key?”

“If I may borrow one of yours?”

“Of course.”

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"He will steal into the study and strike you over the head."

"Frankly, I'd prefer to be shot."

"No. I will insist that you be struck over the head. If the killer used a gun, the whole thing might be over before I can spring from my hiding place."

"Ah, you will spring from your hiding place?"

Brandt nodded. "The moment he raises the lethal weapon to strike. I will leap out with my revolver and catch him in the act. *Flagrante delicto*. You do have a closet or something like that where I can conceal myself?"

"Yes. That door over there."

He leaned forward eagerly. "Then you agree?"

The whole adventure obviously was going to fail. Still, it was an opportunity to pick up fifteen thousand dollars. "Very well," I said. "You may make the arrangements."

During the next week, Brandt and Box Number 1217 brought their negotiations to a conclusion. I insisted upon and received the fifteen thousand dollars in advance, my usual procedure, and this time I took the additional precaution of specifying small bills.

I reasoned that if they were large, Brandt might take the trouble to make a list of the serial numbers and they might eventually be placed into the efficient hands of the police.

Brandt selected a Tuesday eve-

ning and he arrived at my apartment at seven.

That was the correct time.

I led him into the study. "I thought you'd never get here."

He glanced at his watch. "I'm precisely on time."

I looked at my own watch and then let my eyes wander to the electric wall clock and then to the grandfather clock in the corner. "Your watch is half an hour slow."

The evidence was arranged and overwhelming. Brandt put his watch ahead a half an hour. "Are you alone?"

"No. My wife's still here."

Brandt protested. "But . . ."

"She'll be leaving in a few moments. She's going to a movie and won't be back until eleven or thereabouts. Everything should be over by then. Are you armed?"

Brandt took the .38 caliber revolver from his pocket. He was obviously uneasy about handling it. "This belonged to my father."

I heard Helen in the hall and opened the door of my study. She was putting on her gloves.

"Oh, by the way, Helen," I said. "This is Walter Brandt."

Brandt came into her view behind me. He blinked as he looked at her.

She nodded. "A pleasure."

"We'll be busy in here for quite awhile, Helen," I said. "Good-bye, my dear." I closed the door and Brandt and I were alone again.

"What a gorgeous creature,"

Brandt whispered almost to himself. Then he came out of his daze and went to the closet door. He disappeared inside for a moment and then returned. "I'll leave the door open about one inch. That way I can see you at the desk and the door behind you."

"Don't take your eyes off me for a second," I said.

"Of course not. Your life is in my hands."

"Yes. I suppose it is. Would you care for a drink? It will help us relax. We really can't expect the murderer for another hour and there's no sense in you crouching in the closet for that long."

At the liquor cabinet I had my back to him when I tapped the grayish powder into his glass. I had measured it previously to suit a man of his general build and weight. I stirred both drinks and brought him his. "Now sit down and enjoy this."

Brandt was reluctant and I practically had to force him into the easy chair. It wasn't that I was concerned for his comfort. I simply didn't want him to fall forward and perhaps bruise his face. That might be difficult to explain.

"Bottoms up," I said and watched him down about half his glass. "I've told a number of people that you would be here."

Brandt was startled. "Why do that?"

"Just a precaution," I said. "But I haven't told them why you're here."

I thought I'd make things unmistakably clear. "The thought struck me that you might actually want to murder me after all."

His eyes widened. "That's absurd."

"Yes," I said. "I suppose it is. But if you had intended to murder me, what better opportunity than under the arrangements you made. I would be alone and unsuspecting."

He laughed shortly. "Your wife knows I'm here."

"But I arranged that myself."

"Then why bother telling other people I'd be here?"

I smiled. "Perhaps my wife wouldn't remember." What I meant was that she might not want to remember. I am a very, very cautious man. There still might be some connection between the two of them. Something I hadn't been able to discover.

Brandt shook his head. "Why would I pay fifteen thousand dollars to hire a killer if I intended to murder you myself?"

"You might be squeamish about performing the actual job. He would do that. You would simply fail to warn me when he entered the room."

Brandt finished his drink. "You are remarkably suspicious."

"Yes," I said. "And foresighted." I glanced at my watch. It would take approximately five to six minutes for the powder in his drink to take effect. "A cigarette, Mr. Brandt?"

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"I don't usually."

"But this time is an exception," I insisted.

I filled the minutes by going over our plans again and I watched Brandt carefully.

It happened suddenly, as it was supposed to do. His eyes closed and I caught the cigarette as it fell from his fingers.

I tamped it out, broke it, and scattered the tobacco in the wastebasket.

Then I went into the hall to wait.

Helen was not at a movie.

Just before I expected Brandt I had explained to her that I desperately needed some aspirins. We were completely out—something which I had arranged—and would she please go to the drugstore and fetch me some. I would go myself except that I expected a visitor at any moment.

I had timed the errand previously.

Descending in the elevator, walking to the drug store, making the purchase, and returning was an operation that averaged twenty minutes.

Helen was not dilatory, one of her virtues, and I expected her back promptly. Nevertheless, I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard her key in the lock.

She closed the door behind her. "Is your friend still here?"

"Yes, in the study."

I examined her face for the last

time. It was such a pity to be forced to destroy a thing of beauty.

She was putting her purse and gloves on the table when I picked up the solid brass ash tray and struck.

It was swift and complete and she made no sound as she dropped to the floor. I made certain that she was dead; then I wiped the ash-tray and placed it beside her.

I then rejoined Brandt in the study.

He did have the appearance of being dead, a fact which caused me a moment of apprehension, but a check proved he was quite alive, though still unconscious.

If my calculations proved correct, and I was certain they were, he would wake up in about fifteen minutes—a total sleep of one half hour.

I re-set both clocks, my wrist watch, and Brandt's back one half hour to the correct time.

Then I watched him and waited. When I was certain he was on the brink of consciousness, I broke a cigarette in half and lighted one of the pieces. I put it on the lip of the ash tray next to him.

The process of returning to consciousness could take a drowsy minute or two, but I wanted to make it sharp. I slapped a heavy book on one corner of my desk.

"... certainly a lot more comfortable," I said clearly and loudly.

Brandt blinked. "What?"

"I said that it would certainly be

a lot more comfortable if you took a chair into the closet."

Brandt glanced at the wall clocks and checked his wrist watch. His eyes noted the cigarette still burning on the tray and his rational mind told him that if he had dropped off it had been for only a second or two. More likely his attention had just wandered.

And so a half hour was born and died and Brandt was unaware of it.

"Now one thing," I said. "You mustn't fall asleep."

Brandt stifled a yawn. "Of course not."

I smiled. "I just mean that your eyes must never leave me."

"You can depend on me," Brandt said firmly.

The next three hours were interminable. I sat at my desk reading a detective novel. Normally I enjoy them, but this time I was greatly relieved when Brandt finally came out of the closet at eleven o'clock.

"I don't understand what went wrong," he complained petulantly.

"You never should have paid in advance," I admonished. "Your killer simply pocketed the money and decided not to risk the actual murder."

And then we found Helen's body in the hall.

Naturally the police suspected me. But how could I possibly have committed the murder? I had been in Brandt's presence when I had last seen my wife and I had never left his sight until we found her body.

Poor Brandt had a miserable time with the police. They were extremely skeptical about our waiting for a hired killer to appear, but in the end, there was no other explanation.

Helen had decided not to go to the movies or perhaps she had forgotten something and returned to our apartment.

Either she had surprised the killer in the hall, or he had entered moments after she did. He had killed her to prevent recognition or an outcry and then fled.

I regretted losing Helen. She was so beautiful, so ravishing. Especially when she stood against the tapestry with the hunting motif.

But I did have the fifteen thousand dollars.

And there was one other pleasant thing. Brandt Enterprises never again badgered me about subdividing my apartment.

And now that you have finished reading Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, how did you like it? I should also be very interested to receive your reactions to the stories in it. Write to me c/o Suite 105 Lakeview Building, North Palm Beach, Florida.